

Meet Mr. and Mrs. Gen X:

A New Parent Generation

Strategies for school leaders when dealing with customer-service expectations, self-interest and stealth-fighter tactics

BY NEIL HOWE

Slowly but surely, Generation Xers have been taking over from Baby Boomers as the majority of parents in elementary and secondary education. In the early 1990s, Gen Xers began joining parent-teacher associations in the nation's elementary schools. Around 2005, they became the majority of middle school parents. By the fall of 2008, they took over as the predominant parents of high school seniors.

Gen-X parents and Boomer parents belong to two neighboring generations, each possessing its own location in history and its own peer personality. They are similar in some respects, but clearly different in others.

Throughout the 1990s, educators grew accustomed to "helicopter parents," Boomer parents of Millennials who sometimes are helpful, sometimes annoying, yet always hovering over their children and making noise.

Today, behold the era of the Gen-X "stealth-fighter parent." Stealth-fighter parents do not hover. They choose when and where they will attack. If the issue seems below their threshold of importance, they save their energy and let it go entirely. But if it crosses their threshold and shows up on their radar, they will strike — rapidly, in force and often with no warning.

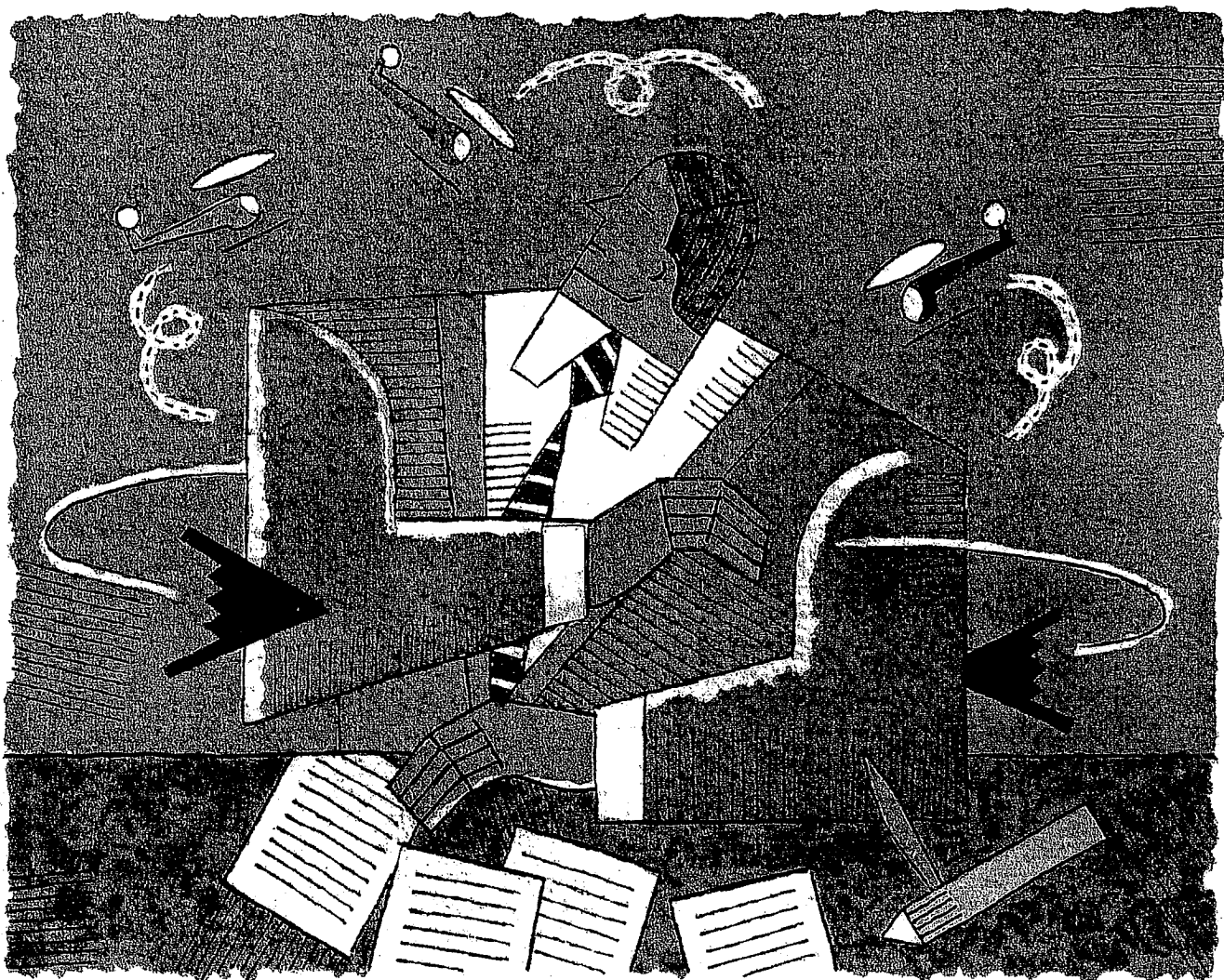
When these Gen-X "security moms" and "committed

dads" are fully roused, they can be even more attached, protective and interventionist than Boomers ever were. Web junkies, they will monitor Edline and Blackboard sites nightly, send e-mails to school board members, trade advice on blogs and look up teacher credentials. Flex workers, they will juggle schedules to monitor their kids' activities in person. Speedy multitaskers, they will quickly switch their kids into — or take them out of — any situation according to their assessment of their youngsters' interests. As *The Washington Post* recently quipped, "Parental involvement in our schools has become an extreme sport."

Common Good

Boomers always have cared deeply about the higher moral and civic goals of education, for the ultimate purpose (recall the '60s!) of creating a more ethical and socially conscious community. Gen-X moms and dads tend to be more interested in how the right school will create concrete opportunities for their own children.

Many Gen Xers believe they live in an individualistic world in which there is no common interest and people do best by looking out for their own interests. As voters, they are less sympathetic than Boomers to cross subsidies and state equalization formulas and more intent on pre-



serving local funds for local purposes. As parents, they will be more exclusively focused on their own child than the good of the school. While Boomers might volunteer for a districtwide curriculum committee, Gen-X parents will prefer to be a class chaperone, which directly benefits (and allows them personally to monitor) their own child.

Boomer helicopter parents generally assume the rewards of school and college are vast but impossible to measure. But stealth-fighter parents are more likely to assume that anything immeasurable is untrustworthy. Back when Xers were graduating from K-12, one blue ribbon commission after another told them their schools had failed and that the passionate hopes of '60s reformers had miscarried. Now they want proof their children won't have the same problem.

Many Gen-X parents acquire a surprising degree of (self-taught) expertise about teaching methods and will bring stacks of Web printouts into meetings with teachers. A quip often used by former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings (herself a late-wave Boomer, born in 1957) speaks to many Gen-X parents: "In God we trust. All others bring data."

This local, pragmatic, bottom-line perspective certainly contrasts with the more global, idealistic and aspirational

perspective of Boomers. It has driven the rapid growth of parent-teacher organizations that opt out of any affiliation to the National Parent Teacher Association. According to many younger parents, the PTA is simply too large, too inflexible, too politically correct and too deferential to the educational establishment.

Skeptical of grandiose claims and worried about making ends meet economically, most Gen Xers are acutely sensitive to the prices they pay and the value they receive in return. As voters, they may doubt that a routine tax or fee is really worth whatever schools are buying with it. As parents, they comparison shop to make sure a school's reputation or brand is worth all the life costs they must incur (including mortgage payments and property taxes) for their children to attend. They are always looking for a discount or shortcut. While Boomers may brag about how much they paid for a BMW, Gen Xers are more likely to brag about how *little* they paid.

As a whole, Gen Xers feel comfortable with market outcomes — and most Gen-X parents expect schools to be run like customer-oriented businesses. As with other purchases and investments, Gen Xers believe their children's education should be a fair and open transaction with complete and accurate information and unconstrained

consumer choice. They will evaluate the transaction on the basis of the value it appears to offer. If it doesn't offer the right value, they will take their business elsewhere — whether another school district, a charter school, a private school or home schooling. It is practically impossible to persuade most Gen-X parents they should relinquish their choice for the sake of some great public good.

Administrators long have complained about Boomer helicopter parents who argue endlessly with teachers and administrators whenever their child encounters a problem. Gen-X stealth-fighter parents are less likely to argue at great length and more likely to find a loophole, buck rank or go quickly to a confrontational posture. Some Xers may skip the discussion stage entirely and move immediately to a decisive action — suddenly filing a lawsuit, for example, or withdrawing their child from a school with no warning.

Employers already notice this difference with Gen Xers as employees. When they don't like their boss, they don't talk; they walk. As K-12 parents, they will walk with their child.

What To Do

So how should schools adjust to this broad shift in generational attitudes and priorities? Educators can implement the following strategies to cope with Gen-X parents:

► **ASSUME NO TRUST. MARKET TO THEM, SPELL OUT THE RULES AND START RELATIONSHIPS EARLY.** To win over Gen-X consumers, almost every industry — from autos to health insurance plans to financial and legal services — is trying to build trust by assuming no brand loyalty, by rejustifying product value from the ground up and by educating buyers about what they must do in order for the product to work as expected. K-12 schools will get along better with Gen X if they take a similar approach.

First, assume no trust. Given their generally positive or at least empowering experience with education institutions, Boomers generally have trusted the school bureaucracy to do right by their children. Not today's younger parents. Schools must gird themselves for Xers who feel they have no reason to trust the schools' competence — and take steps to justify their performance in every area, from physical safety to academic achievement.

Second, market to them. More business oriented than Boomers, Gen Xers are impressed by marketing skills that enable an institution to make its best case quickly and easily to busy consumers. Incredibly, public school districts routinely bury favorable findings about their performance in unreadable memos, while allowing the media to shape negative findings without rebuttal. Most districts would benefit by hiring a marketing consultant. To Gen Xers,

The Lineup of Generations

When you talk generations, the first thing most people want to know is where they fit.

This article traces the life stories of today's six living generations, who they are and how they have affected America's schools. Think about your own colleagues, students and family members. When were they born, and how has their generational membership shaped them?

THE G.I. GENERATION (born 1901-1924) are today retired and emeritus. They came of age during the Great Depression and World War II. In midlife, they built suburbs, invented vaccines, laid out interstates and launched moon rockets. Civic-minded and politically powerful all their lives (even deep in old age — think of the AARP), G.I.s built many of today's bedrock postwar social and economic institutions, including the standardized K-12 school system and comprehensive high school.

The G.I.s were themselves a generation of extraordinary educational achievement, and they hoped to institutionalize that success in a system that would guarantee steady educational progress for their own children and grandchil-

dren. Those hopes ran aground when Boomer and Gen-X students passed through that system from the 1960s through 1980s. Today's elder generation of senior citizens, G.I.s remind younger educators that once upon a time most people trusted schools, respected teachers and believed national progress depended upon a well-run school system.

THE SILENT GENERATION (born 1925-1942) are mostly retired but still present as school board members, senior civic leaders and community volunteers. Children of the Great Depression and World War II, they came of age too late to be war heroes and too early to be youthful free spirits. Instead, this rarely marrying, lonely crowd became the risk-averse professionals, sensitive rock 'n' rollers and civil rights advocates of a conformist postwar era.

Midlife was an anxious passage for a generation torn between stolid elders and passionate juniors. Their assumption of national leadership in the 1970s coincided with fragmenting families, cultural diversity and institutional complexity. Many reacted to their own strictly sheltered childhood by giving greater freedom to their

Boomer and Gen-X children.

The Silents were protected, well-behaved K-12 students during the 1930s and '40s. Silent educators set the tone for the nation's schools during the late 1960s through 1980s, dismantling G.I. rules, diversifying requirements and experimenting with open classrooms and unstructured curricula. As K-12 parents, they were generally hands-off, trusting the school system to do its work. Skillful with discussion and process, many Silent educators continue to preside over school bureaucracies while mediating among their younger colleagues.

THE BABY BOOM GENERATION (born 1943-1960) are today's most experienced teachers and principals and the majority of superintendents, school board members and local political leaders. They grew up as indulged youth during an era of community-spirited progress. Coming of age, however, Boomers rejected the outer-world system built by their parents in favor of inner visions and self-perfection.

The Baby Boom awakening climaxed with Vietnam War protests, the 1967 summer of

who disproportionately fill the ranks of America's sales and marketing workforce, the inability to shape and project a clear message is itself a symptom of incompetence.

Third, spell out the rules. Gen Xers, accustomed to thriving in a high-option marketplace, tend to believe they have a right to anything not explicitly denied them in the contract. When introducing themselves to parents, K-12 districts should explicitly spell out the reciprocal obligations of parents and schools — and enumerate concretely where the school will take the lead (and parents should not interfere) and where parents must pitch in to ensure student success. Like many colleges, schools can frame this agreement as a contract or a covenant. While not legally binding, this document will catch the attention of these parents, who always want to know the rules of the game.

Finally, schools should make every effort to start their relationship with parents early and on their own terms before there is a problem. If a child ends up failing an exam or being suspended for misbehavior, the teacher or counselor could be an ally in whom the parent confides — or an enemy the parent fights tooth and nail. The first meeting often makes all the difference.

► **STRESS PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION.** Compared to Boomers, Gen Xers are less likely to trust good intentions or a well-designed institu-

tional process and more likely to trust bottom-line incentives and personal accountability. They don't want to see guidelines and flowcharts outlining a school's emergency response plan or curriculum acceleration plan. What they want to see is a real person who is concretely accountable for the outcome.

School leaders should stress a chain of personal accountability for anything that goes wrong, particularly in zero-tolerance areas like school safety. Designate a go-to person for everything from fire drills to hall monitoring to student counseling and mental health.

In their own market-oriented lives, Gen Xers are accustomed to bottom-line incentives ("win this contract and get a bonus; lose it and you're fired") and often are suspicious of institutions where individual accountability never seems to enter the picture.

Showcasing accountability will also help draw Gen-X parents into volunteering for tasks that don't involve their own children. Give Gen Xers "ownership" of the project. Make sure they understand they are helping real people, not just "the system." And find creative ways to reward them if it goes well, as many of these parents are entrepreneurial.

► **OFFER DATA, STANDARDS, TRANSPARENCY AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT.** Gen-X parents want measurable

love, inner-city riots, the first Earth Day and Kent State. In the aftermath, Boomer "yuppies" appointed themselves arbiters of the nation's values and crowded into such "culture careers" as teaching, journalism, marketing and the arts. During the '90s, they trumpeted family values and waged scorched-earth culture wars.

First-wave Boomers passed through schools during a time of strong civic confidence, when the teaching profession was at a height of public prestige. By the time the last wave arrived, schools were immersed in a raging controversy over social turmoil, youth anger and worsening outcomes. Boomers flooded into teaching careers in the 1980s and '90s, bringing an intensive work ethic and an ideological bent. As parents, they have been an active, supportive and hovering group, viewing public schools as institutions of mission and meaning and colleges as essential destinations for their own children.

GENERATION X (born 1961-81) are most of today's teachers and the newer principals and superintendents. They survived a hurried childhood of divorce, latchkeys and open classrooms. They learned young they were largely on their own and could not count on any institution, including schools, to watch out for their best interests. From grunge to

hip-hop, their culture has revealed a hardened edge. Politically, they have leaned toward pragmatism and nonaffiliation. In jobs, they have embraced free-agent risk, trust the marketplace over institutional intermediaries, and matured into one of the most dynamic and resilient generations of entrepreneurs in U.S. history.

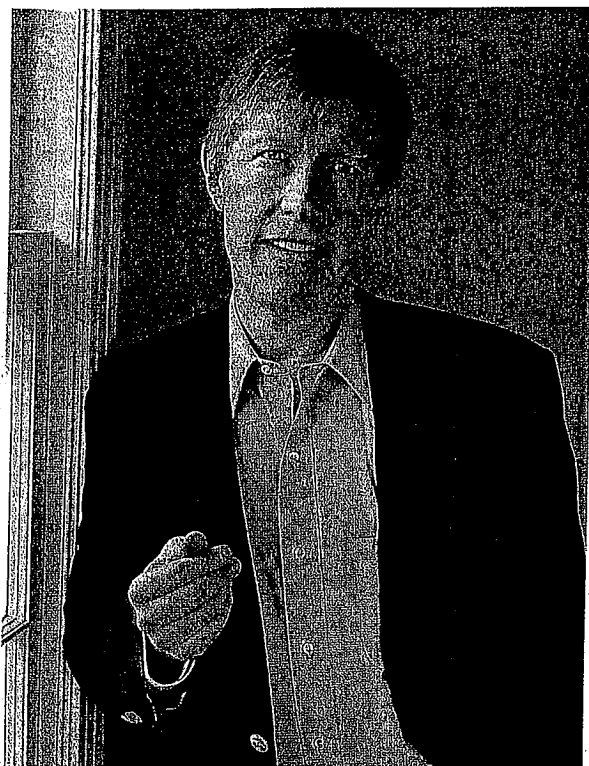
Gen Xers passed through grade school while the Consciousness Revolution was in full boil. Even as their school achievement leveled out, "A Nation at Risk" report accused Xers of being "a rising tide of mediocrity." Schools curtailed supervision, de-emphasized the basics and dramatically lowered teacher pay. As today's dominant teacher corps and rising political leaders, Xers are rejecting ideology to focus on productivity and measurable standards.

Gen X includes most of today's hardest-edged K-12 reformers, including Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the D.C. schools, and KIPP founders Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg. As parents, they are determined not to let their children experience the same problems they encountered. They have provided the most vocal constituency for school reforms that set standards, require transparency, impose accountability and enable all forms of parental choice.

MILLENNIAL GENERATION (born 1982-2004) are today's K-12 students as well as entry-level teachers and staff. They arrived when "Baby on Board" signs appeared. As abortion and divorce rates ebbed, the popular culture began stigmatizing hands-off parenting styles and recasting babies as special. By the mid-'90s, politicians were defining adult issues (from tax cuts to PBS funding to Internet access) in terms of their effects on children. The media has cordoned off child-friendly havens; student achievement is rising; and educators speak of standards and cooperative learning. As this generation's leading edge now graduates from colleges and starts careers under the wings of protective parents, rates of community service and voting among young adults are surging. (Sometimes this generation is referred to as Generation Y.)

HOMELAND GENERATION (born 2005-?) are now entering preschool and will include the babies born between now and the mid-2020s. Their always-on-guard nurturing style will be substantially set by Gen-X parents, who already are gaining a reputation for extreme sheltering.

— Neil Howe



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standards for schools, teachers and students. They want to know how those standards are linked to career and life success. They want to see data measuring the achievement of those standards. And they expect transparency in all important deliberations about strategy.

Xer constituents will call on school boards to show in detail that each tax dollar serves a concrete purpose for their children's education. They are less likely than Boomers to accept credentials (of schools, administrators and teachers) at face value and will want access to data on everything from hiring practices to teacher evaluations.

Gen-X parents will be especially prone to pounce on issues that affect student success. Schools will face rising pressure to offer accurate and comprehensible information on all their evaluation systems — from consistency in grade point averages and Advanced Placement scores across schools and courses to procedures for assigning class levels and evaluating disabilities.

Above all, educators should collect data on what happens to students after graduation. Gen-X parents often are astonished to find out how little schools know about long-term student outcomes. After all, in the marketplace companies are judged, continuously and without mercy, according to how well their products measure up.

Gen-X parents will demand more than graduation and college enrollment rates. They will want to know the documented career outcomes and earnings capabilities of graduates five and 10 years down the road. They also may

want to see data comparing long-term outcomes among an array of choices, such as "stopping out" of school for a year, home schooling, entering a career academy, loading up on AP courses, using community college as a stepping stone for a four-year degree and so on. Gen Xers want to advise their child in the same way they manage their finances: hands on, eyes open, all options on the table.

► **OFFER REAL-TIME SERVICE (THE "FED-EX" TEST).** Gen-X parents will apply the "FedEx" test to their children's schools, expecting the service to be cheerful, fast and efficient, with information and options in real time, online, 24/7. As educators are already beginning to note, those once-per-semester parent-teacher nights, snail-mail notifications and rotary phone tree messages no longer will cut it. If Gen-X parents can get instant, real-time information on something as trivial as a package, why should they stay in the dark about their child's academic performance?

School leaders should use digital technology to offer parents continuous access and include them in a tight cycle of intervention and redirection whenever their children hit an educational snag. Course management systems like Edline, which allow teachers to record and track each student's performance every day, also can be used to instantly share performance data with parents. Some years down the road (when fewer Baby Boomers are left to object), schools may even install real-time video monitoring systems that let parents tune in to whatever is happening in their child's classroom.

► **PRESENT YOUR SCHOOL AS THE BEST PARENT CHOICE IN A COMPETITIVE MARKET.** Ever since their children first entered elementary school, Gen Xers have been the most vocal constituency for education policies that empower parent choice, including vouchers, magnet schools and home schooling. Even within the public school system, the share of parents who say they "chose" (rather than being "assigned to") their public school has grown steadily, from 11 percent in 1993 to 15 percent in 2003 to 18 percent in 2007.

Public school leaders who have grown accustomed to their role as default educators will no longer enjoy this luxury. Both public and private school leaders need to market their schools as top-notch options in a competitive education market and persuade parents they do indeed deliver the goods.

Gen Xers like being informed and energetic consumers. When Gen-X parents perceive they really are choosing a school, their enthusiasm and goodwill can be beneficial. When they perceive they don't have any real choice, however, educators should prepare for a strong backlash over any policy event that reinforces their sense of being "trapped" (such as a decision to close down or combine schools or to redraw district lines).

Boomers, while often complaining, usually end up adapting themselves to whatever the system dishes out. Gen Xers are more likely to fight tooth and nail and even "game the system" to send their child to the school they decide is best.

► **PREPARE FOR THE MODULAR "OPT-OUT" CONSUMER AND THE INNOVATIVE HIGH-TECH COMPETITOR.** Gen Xers like to compartmentalize, viewing every transaction as a menu-driven series of discrete and modular choices. Across America, Gen-X consumers are dealing out the middleperson, avoiding product packages and demanding every item be customized to their tastes. Why buy a whole CD when you can purchase just the one song you like on iTunes?

Similarly, when making educational choices for their children, they may wonder why they should sign on for the whole K-12 package when parts of it may not be a perfect fit for their special child.

Many will want to split the K-12 experience into its components and pick and choose exactly what they want for their children. If a high school student wants to take a course that is not offered, can he take it online or at a community college for credit? If a middle schooler is passionate about fencing, can she opt out of physical education to take lessons? If she wants to study marine biology, can she attend the career academy across town in the afternoons? If a student drops out, is there a customized, high-tech substitute to get that high school degree? If a certain school fails to facilitate this level of customization, Gen-X parents will take their business elsewhere.

As Gen-X parents generate a rising demand for a wide

spectrum of educational choices and credential substitutes over the next couple of decades, other Gen Xers entering midlife are likely to rise up to meet this demand. Gen-X entrepreneurs will find ways to provide new options outside the traditional school setting, through auxiliary programs, online courses, career modules and home-schooling aids. Gen-X info-tech designers will steadily improve the efficacy, flexibility, interactivity and entertainment value of teaching tools.

Meanwhile, as Gen-X voters, executives and elected officials replace Boomers in top leadership roles, they may agree to relax the credentials and help legitimize these end runs around the system. K-12 schools can deal with these new options by working with them, adopting them or outcompeting them. They cannot simply ignore them.

In the coming era of accountability, K-12 leaders need to face up to the rising tide of Gen-X parents. Schools that figure it out, collect the right data and market themselves intelligently to this new generation of parents will be able to rebrand themselves for success in the decades ahead. ■

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